INTRODUCTION TO CANCER

Definition of Cancer

Cancer, an abnormal growth of cells anywhere in the body, is often described as a group of more than 100 different diseases that have similar characteristics. Cancer occurs when genes in a cell allow it to become abnormal, and divide and grow uncontrollably. Cell division is normal, but when this process is uncontrolled, a mass of tissue (called a growth or tumor) forms.

Malignant tumors are cancerous and can spread widely to other parts of the body by entering the bloodstream or lymphatic system as well as harming nearby tissues and organs. (NCI cervix) The spread of cancer is called metastasis. Metastasis is dangerous because the farther a cancer spreads, the harder it is to control, and because a number of vital organs may be harmed at once. Benign tumors are not "cancer" and do not spread widely throughout the body, although they can grow substantially and damage surrounding tissues if not treated.

Cancer Sites

There are many kinds of cancer, because there are many kinds of cells in the body. Cancers are named for the part of the body (primary site) in which they begin. Cells that spread to another part of the body have the same kind of abnormal cells and the same name as the original cancer. (NCI cervix)

Causes of Cancer

Many things cause cancer by affecting the genes that control cell growth. Each type of cancer is caused by different factors related to lifestyle, environment, and heredity. Some factors are well established, while others are uncertain or unknown. The most common causes of cancer in Rhode Island are tobacco, unbalanced diets, and too much sunlight. We can control many causes of cancer by making good choices in our everyday lives.

Stage of Disease

Stage describes the extent that the cancer has spread. Determining the stage of the cancer helps inform treatment decisions and outlook for recovery.

Risk Factors

A risk factor for cancer is anything that increases a person's chance of developing cancer. Some risk factors are non-modifiable such as genetics and family history of cancer. It is believed that there is some genetic component to all cancers. However, as research progresses, specific genetic markers for individual cancers are becoming clearer. Other risk factors are associated with lifestyle, such as tobacco use, diet, lack of exercise, alcohol use, exposure to ultraviolet radiation, and certain sexually transmitted diseases. Several risk factors can act together to increase the risk of cancer. When cancer is caused by a particular exposure, the cancer may not develop for a long period of time. The time between exposure and diagnosis of cancer is called the latency period. (Vermont)